

HEALTH HAZARD EVALUATIONS

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

- More than 294,000 new cases of nonfatal occupational illnesses were reported in private industry in 2002.
- Some occupational diseases are caused by agents or working conditions in which there are no regulations or allowable exposure levels may not protect all workers.
- New occupational health problems have emerged and employees are not equipped with techniques for controlling and/or recognizing these hazards.

WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

CDC's Health Hazard Evaluation (HHE) program is a congressionally mandated program that responds to requests for evaluations of workplace health hazards from employers; employees and their representatives; and government agencies. CDC conducts studies of workplaces in response to these requests to determine if workers are exposed to hazardous materials or harmful conditions. An HHE presents the opportunity to obtain information on occupational exposures where standards are lacking or do not protect all workers. Workplace exposures studied include chemicals, biological agents, work stress, noise, radiation, and ergonomic stressors. At no cost to the employer, CDC evaluates the workplace environment and the health of employees by reviewing records and/or conducting onsite testing. More than 12,000 HHEs have been completed since the inception of the program in 1971. Since 1999, CDC has been conducting follow-back surveys of HHE participants to assess their satisfaction with the process and to learn whether the recommendations provided led to workplace improvements.

Example of Program in Action

The HHE was an intricate source in defining a correlation between adverse health effects and occupational exposures. Follow-up activities were also performed to assist employers, employees, physicians, and others serving a critical role in reducing exposure and preventing disease. Examples of practices include an assessment and control of exposure to metalworking fluids, which have been associated with the development of hypersensitivity pneumonitis (a disabling lung disease); evaluation of exposure to ultraviolet light as a cause of skin and eye irritation; and recognition of the potential for overexposure to wood dust during furniture stripping and refinishing.

HHEs have been central to the public health response to terrorist attacks by providing state-of-the-art methods for assessing exposure, raising awareness of occupational health concerns among emergency responders, and developing strategies to improve preparedness for future events.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Emerging occupational health hazards will continue to be a primary focus of the HHE program. CDC will work to inform employers and employees of the HHE program's availability as a unique resource to provide independent, science-based evaluations of a wide variety of occupational health hazards. Increasing efforts will be made to reach Spanish-speaking workers and their employers. Results from the follow-back surveys will be used for continuous improvements in the HHE program.

For additional information on this or other CDC programs, visit www.cdc.gov/program

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